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Carter on CIA: 1976 views vs. 1977

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Is President Carter going "soft" on the CIA? His recent defense of the agency, amid charges of secret payments to foreign leaders, contrasts — at least in tone — with the criticism he often voiced as a presidential candidate.

His campaign position paper, "Jimmy Carter on the CIA," for example, implied that foreign intelligence activities ought to be confined to information-gathering:

"Intelligence is a service to allow foreign policy to be based on more complete information. The function of the intelligence agency should be to provide this service, not to overthrow governments or make foreign policy unilaterally or in secret."

Yet barely a month after becoming President, Mr. Carter last week argued the need for "some degree of secrecy" and the "extremely damaging" peril of disclosure, on grounds of "the potential security of our country" — in much the same way (and words) as former President Nixon had defended similarly controversial CIA activities on grounds of "national security."

Conservatives cheered

The Carter response has cheered many conservatives, such as Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D) of West Virginia, who endorses the President's "option of discretion in the use of clandestine payments as an instrument of foreign policy."

But it troubles some liberals, who had hoped the new President would curb the supersecret agency's more interventionist operations, some of which have been uncovered in recent years.

One disappointed House of Representatives liberal, a foreign affairs specialist, complains that the CIA needs, not more protections, but "more reforms."

Others explain Mr. Carter's new defensiveness toward the CIA as a natural result of his transition from candidate to President — from outside critic to chief protector of the nation's security.

The CIA, and the President who now defends it, also may be benefiting from the continuing backlash to Congress' abortive attempt last year to overhaul the intelligence community.

Caught in mood shift

That crusade, inspired by dramatic congressional hearings that implicated the CIA in covert activities ranging from "destabilizing" overseas governments to trying to assassinate foreign leaders, became caught in the cross-currents of a rapidly-changing public mood that drowned all but token reform.

The most outspoken leaders of that ill-fated crusade have remained conspicuously silent on the new controversy — and the new President's handling of it.

Sen. Frank Church (D) of Idaho, who chaired last year's tumultuous Senate hearings and later ran against Mr. Carter for the party's presidential nomination, refers all inquiries to the new Senate Intelligence Committee.

Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D) of New York, a leading House critic of the CIA and author of unsuccessful reform legislation, has reserved comment.

Meanwhile, the CIA's credibility, in spite of the allegations of payments to foreign leaders, appears on a sharp rebound — at least in Congress.

Its new Director, Admiral Stansfield Turner, last week was recommended unanimously by the Senate Intelligence Committee after a modest four hours of questioning and confirmed unanimously by the full Senate after just six minutes of debate.